

THE NAME OF GOD
AND THE LINGUISTIC
THEORY OF THE KABBALA

I

“Thy word (or: essence) is true from the beginning”; thus reads the Psalmist’s passage, oft quoted in kabbalistic literature (Psalm 119: 160). According to the originally conceived Judaistic meaning, truth was the word of God which was audible both acoustically and linguistically.* Under the system of the synagogue, revelation is an acoustic process, not a visual one; or revelation at least ensues from an area which is metaphysically associated with the acoustic and the perceptible (in a sensual context). This is repeatedly emphasised with reference to the

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words of the Torah (Deuteronomy 4: 12): "Ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice." What precisely we are to understand by this voice and what is uttered through it is the very question which the various currents of Judaistic religious thought have constantly posed themselves. The indissoluble link between the idea of the revealed truth and the notion of language—is as much, that is, as the word of God makes itself heard through the medium of human language, if, otherwise, human experience can reach the knowledge of such a word at all—is presumably one of the most important, if not the most important, legacies bequeathed by Judaism to the history of religions.

It will not, however, be possible, within the framework made available to us here, to investigate the full breadth and depth of the terms of this question. In this respect we must look in to the literature and thought of the various Jewish mystics, in order to discover what they can teach us about this problem.

The point of departure of all mystical linguistic theories, among which we should also number those of the Kabbalists, is constituted by the conviction that the language—the medium—in which the spiritual life of man is accomplished, or consummated, includes an inner property, an aspect which does not altogether merge or disappear in the relationships of communication between men. Man passes on information, man tries to render himself comprehensible to other men, but in all such attempts there is something else vibrating, which is not merely communication, meaning and expression. The sound upon which all language is built, and the voice which gives form to the language, forges it out from the matter of sound; these are already, *prima facie* beyond our understanding. The age-old question, which has divided the philosophical camp since the time of Plato and Aristotle, namely whether language relies on tradition, agreement or on some inner property within the being itself, has, from time immemorial, been dealt with in the light of this latent complexity of the undecipherable character of language.

However, if language is something more than communication and expression, which are the bases of any linguistic research, and when this sensual element, from whose fullness

and profundity it is generated, also contains that other feature, which I earlier called its inner property, then the subsequent question is raised: what exactly is this "secret" or "hidden" dimension of language, about whose existence all mystics for all time feel unanimous agreement, from India and the mystics of Islam right up to the Kabbalists and Jacob Boehme? The answer is, with virtually no trace of hesitation, the following: it is the symbolic nature of language which defines this dimension. The linguistic theories of mystics frequently diverge when it comes to determining this symbolic nature. But all mystics in quest of the secret of language come to share a common basis, namely the fact that language is used to communicate something which goes way beyond the sphere which allows for expression and formation; the fact, also, that a certain inexpressible something, which only manifests itself in symbols, resonates in every manner of expression; that this something is fundamental to every manner of expression, and, if I may say so, flashes through the chinks which exist in the universal structure of expression. This conviction is at the same time the common basis and the experience from which it has nourished and revitalised itself in every generation, our own included. The mystic discovers in language a quality of dignity, a dimension inherent to itself, as one might phrase it at the present time: something pertaining to its structure which is not adjusted to a communication of what is communicable, but rather—and all symbolism is founded on this paradox—to a communication of what is non-communicable, of that which exists within it for which there is no expression; and even if it could be expressed, it would in no way have any meaning, or any communicable "sense."

But at this point we are encroaching on the religious domain—which is certainly not the only domain which can harbour symbolism, as is demonstrated already by every theory of aesthetics which is debatable to a greater or lesser degree—and the respective content of the language of God, considered as that area which is most closely associated with the secret dimension of language that is mentioned above. In this area the original concern of mystics was that they departed from the language used by mortal men, in order to discover within it the language of revelation, or even discover language *as* revelation. Constantly

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they would worry and brood over the question: how is it possible that the language of the gods, or the language of God, infiltrates the spoken language and because of this infiltration lays itself open to discovery. From time immemorial they have sensed an abyss, a depth in language which they have set themselves the task of measuring, exploring and consequently conquering and mastering. This is the point from which the mystical linguistic theories of all religions issue, the point at which language should be at once language of revelation and language of human reason. This is the fundamental thesis of linguistic mysticism, as is indicated by Johann Georg Hamann with masterly laconicism; "Language—mother of reason and revelation, their α (alpha) and ω (omega)."¹

If our intention in the following pages is to attempt to say something which will contribute to an understanding of the conception of language maintained by the Kabbalists, this is primarily for the reason that their superabundantly positive delineation of language, as the "mystery revealed" of all things that exist, made it possible to establish this as the most highly instructive paradigm of a mystical theory of language.

There are essentially three themes attaching to an argument such as this which consistently occupy the foremost position, in their various aspects:

1) The conception that creation and revelation are both principally and essentially auto-representations of God himself, in which, as a consequence and in accordance with the infinite nature of the divinity, certain instants of the divine are introduced, which can only be communicated in terms of symbols in the finite and determined realm of all that is created.² A directly associated

¹ In a letter from Hamann to Jacobi written at the end of 1785, shortly before his death, cf. *Hamanns Schriften*, ed. Gildemeister 5, p. 122, and Rudolf Unger, *Hamanns Sprachtheorie im Zusammenhange seines Denkens*, 1905, p. 226, in which the author completely misconstrues the importance of this epigram for Hamann's thought.

² Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, 2, 1834, pp. 73 & 248. The author is of the opinion that he has discovered in the Kabbala another conception of the Creation which is seen not as the auto-representation of God, but as the shadow projected by God. However, he has misunderstood his sources for this thesis in the *Emek ha-Melekh*, folio 12b, para. 61, where the argument has nothing to do with this. In kabbalistic literature I have only once come across the conception of nature as the

factor with this is the further conception that language is the essence of the universe.

2) The central standpoint of the name of God as the metaphysical origin of all language, and the conception of language as the explanation—by dismantling—of this name, such as it appears principally in the documents relating to Revelation, but also in all language in general. The language of God, which is crystallised in the name of God and, in the last analysis, in the one single name itself, which is its center, is the basis of all spoken language, in which it is reflected and symbolically manifest.

3) The dialectical relation between magic and mystique in the theory of the names of God, as well as in the extraordinary power which is attributed to and recognised in the simple human word.

But before I deal with the various perceptions of the Kabbalists, I feel that I should make one observation at this stage, in order to avoid misunderstandings. Seen as an historical document, the Hebrew Bible contains no magic concept of the name of God. Of course, the passage of the Torah (Exod. 3: 6-14), which relates the revelation of the name of God, YHVH, by the burning bush (and about which a plethora of exegeses has been written), is written in an extremely emphatic manner; but even here, and still more so in the numerous other passages which contain references to the invocation of the name of God, the magic aspect is conspicuously absent. The fact that this aspect was at a later time introduced into the text, reveals the history of the influence of the Bible, and, in this respect, is relevant and of interest to our exposition. The name which is explained to Moses by the burning bush is nevertheless not even directly designated as the Tetragram, although its etymology does imply some reference to it: "I shall be who I shall be." If this explanation, which is certainly not intended to be a philosophical one, is to be understood in the sense of the Torah, it would seem to express rather the freedom of God, who will be there, present and existent, for Israel, whatever form or manifestation

shadow projected by the divine name, and this again in the light of the mystique of language. I found this in the manuscript commentary on the Psalms, namely the *Kaph ha-Ketoreth*, which was printed c. 1500 in Paris.

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this presence or existence might take. But the name so defined lacks, as we have said, the aura of magic, which the Torah strives to remove as far as possible not only from this name, but from the word in general.

To quote Benno Jacob, an eminent scholar in this domain:³ "It is in fact most striking, in relation to the decisively sacramental (one is presumably to understand: sacral) meaning which the *word* has in the contemporary camp of heathendom, that it at no juncture plays any role whatsoever in Israelite religion, and more specifically in the ritual of this religion. The silence is so complete that it can only be interpreted as willful. In the exercise of all his devotional duties, the Israelite priest is totally *mute*, with the exception of the blessing which he has to utter (Num. 6:24) and which (by virtue of its wording) is not only protected from any misunderstanding, but also expressly guaranteed against any kind of mistaken interpretation. Not one single word is prescribed for the priest to speak in any of his duties. He carries out his functions and sacrificial deeds without a word. He is instructed so fastidiously in the ritual to be observed in the service of the day of atonement, that not one definite word comes to our ears, because he has no such word to pronounce. The rites which he must observe with regard to a leper are so precisely laid down, that there is no whisper of any pertinent formula. The agenda: ritual of the Israelite priest in effect only consists of *agenda*, i.e. acts. If we weigh up the other similarity between the Israelite cult and the cult of other ancient religions, this silence can only amount to conscious opposition. Every and any indication that the word is imbued through itself with some force, and that the prescribed formula operates with a magic effect, should be avoided at all costs."

This extremely pertinent observation is not contradicted by the stipulation that, in prayer or any specific procedures associated with prayer, the name of God is 'invoked,' because this invocation is in point of fact separate from the actual ritual itself, in as far as it is carried out by priests. In this respect, however, one should not exclude the fact that the magic note again crops up here. In striking contrast to the quotation used

³ Benno Jacob, *Im Namen Gottes. Eine sprachliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Alten und Neuen Testament*, 1903, p. 64.

above, a contemporary scholar has this to say about the invocation of the name YHVH: "In a theological sense, it occupies the position which is taken up in other cults by the cultual image. It was surrounded by a whole apparatus of not uncomplicated cultual representations, rites and provisions, in order to protect the knowledge one might have about it, but above all the use which Israel was permitted to make of it. With a reality of such a holy order entrusted to it, Israel found itself confronted with an enormous task, which consisted not least of all in the resistance of all the temptations which arose, both simultaneously and implicitly."⁴ This is the meaning of the biblical mention of the "sanctification of the name." It is quite conceivable, and has been the subject of many considerations,⁵ that even in Israel one was in those times likely to make use of this name in the course of certain mysterious and magic practices which constituted a real danger for those concerned. The text of the Bible, however, gives us no direct evidence of this, and this would seem quite significant.

Among historians of religion there is a widespread conception that the magic quality of the name relies on the fact that a close and substantial relation exists between the name and the name's bearer. The name is a real, non-fictitious quantity. It contains a declaration about the nature of its bearer or at least something of the potency attaching to it;⁶ it is, further, identified with the nature and essence of what is named by it—a viewpoint which played an important role in the oriental world which surrounded Judaism, and which found specific emphasis in Egyptian religion. But one is nevertheless permitted to remark that the magic of the word is a far deeper and more far-reaching fundamental experience for man—an experience which has simply undergone a particularly acute concentration in the magic of the name. The fact that words have an effect which greatly surpasses all "understanding" needs no supporting reference from religious speculation: the experiences of poets, mystics and anyone else represent very fully the sensual properties of the word. The issue, first and foremost, of this experience is the conception

⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* 1, 1957, p. 185.

⁵ E.g. by S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, I, 1921, pp. 50 ff.

⁶ von Rad, p. 183.

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of the power of names and their potential employment in magic practices. It is consequently not surprising that, in the course of the historical development of Judaism, this magic has had some effect on authorities on the Scriptures and apocalyptic writers, and that this has been due to external influences no less than to inner pressures.⁷ Even when it was not endowed with magic accents it was able to make itself at home in the biblical concept of the vast might which inhabits the name of God. There were in fact sufficient passages in the holy scriptures—the clearest probably being in Deuteronomy—in which, precisely, a divergence was drawn up between God himself, persisting in his transcendency, and his name, which is present in the temple, with the result that the name itself is akin to a quintessence of the sacred, that is, completely intangible. It is an esoteric configuration, effective within creation, of power, namely the omnipotence of God. The absolute awe which encircles everything which attaches to this name and its manifestation determines everything which authorities on the Scriptures and teachers of the Talmud are attempting to establish about it in terms of definitions or assertions. “Heaven and earth are perishable, but ‘Thy great name liveth and endureth in eternity’. The name had to be written together with godliness. The woman suspected of infidelity was duly informed that she was not to bring about the effacement of the great name written in godliness (in accordance with the stipulation in Num. 5). Whoever writes down a divine name may not even reply to a monarch who is addressing him a greeting before he has finished writing the name. And it is not just complete divine names which are not to be effaced; this stipulation applies to individual letters in a divine name. Moses only allowed himself to mention the Tetragram after the 21st word. In the case of sacrifices this divine name is used exclusively, in order to afford the sectarians no pretext (to parade their gnostic speculations). The Tetragram and all its transcriptions were placed in the Ark of the Covenant.”⁸

⁷ Jacob, p. 110, concerning the way in which these ideas penetrate Pharisaical Judaism.

⁸ Ludwig Blau, *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen*, 1898, p. 119-120, in which the source data for these assertions are also given. Some of these assertions have been recently examined in a philosophical spirit by Emanuel Levinas,

The most significant moment in this development and at the same time the most paradoxical moment is the fact that the name, by which God calls himself and which is used to utter invocations, withdraws from the acoustic sphere and becomes unpronounceable. To begin with it is tolerated for a few especially rare occasions within the temple as a word which may be pronounced, for example when the priest gives the blessing or on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur); after this, however, and above all after the destruction of the temple, it was completely withdrawn into the realm of the ineffable. It is precisely this ineffability, with which the name of God can, it is true, be addressed but no longer expressed, which has, in terms of the Jewish sensitivity, endowed it with that inexhaustible depth, evidence of which is available even from such a radical exponent of theistic rationalism as Hermann Cohen in a stirring passage speaking of the Messianic promise (Zechariah 14:9): "In that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one" (a sentence which forms the conclusion of the prayer of the Jewish liturgy which is repeated three times daily), he says that it is in no way comprehensible that the name should be so emphasized, in the way which emerges from the translation. "The word *shem*, however, contains an inexhaustible force of expression in the religious sensitivity of the Jew. The name of God is no longer a magic word, as it once was, but it is the magic word which attaches to the Messianic faith ... The name itself will one day announce the one-ness of God; there will be evidence of this in all languages, and in all peoples. 'A day shall come when I will transform the language of all peoples into a clearer language, so that they will invoke the name of God all together.' This is the original Messianic meaning of the divine name."⁹ The historian of religion may justifiably doubt the fact that it is the original Messianic meaning of the divine name; but it is beyond any doubt, in this passage, that Cohen speaks as the pure Utopian which he was when he expresses the attitude of the

Le Nom de Dieu d'après quelques textes talmudiques, in the colloquium: *L'Analyse du langage théologique*. (*Le Nom de Dieu*, ed. E. Castelli, Paris, 1969, pp. 155-167).

⁹ Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften I*, 1924, p. 63. This passage is taken from one of Cohen's late writings.

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devout and godly man confronted with the unfathomable depth of the divine name.

II

Even before speculation about language really got under way among the esotericists of Judaism, the name of God was central to their area of interest. From the second century A.D. onwards, at the very latest, the Tetragram, which in the meantime had become ineffable, was labelled with a term which at once contains within itself the possible contradictions in the conception of its meaning and its function. The name of God is in fact designated as the *shem ha-meforash*, which is in no way an unequivocal meaning, but rather a meaning which scintillates with differing and self-contradictory meanings. The passive participle *meforash* can in effect mean "made known" as well as "explicitly explained" or directly—that is, in accordance with its letters—"pronounced." On the other hand it can also signify "separate" and even "hidden" in this context; what is more, for all these interpretations one can make reference to thoroughly convincing proof contained in the usual terminology of Hebrew and Aramaic sources of the early centuries.¹⁰ The fact that it is one and the same term which on the one hand designates the formal name and on the other hand the mysterious and hidden name does not constitute the least evident paradox of religious terminology. But whatever the original meaning might have been, there was, in the course of time, a tendency to shift the emphasis to the second category of meaning, in which this term designates the secret name which is an extraction of all explicit designation and therefore of explanation. This is the imperative consequence of the fact that, from the 2nd or 3rd century onwards,

¹⁰ The literature relevant to the *Shem meforash* is abundant. I shall limit myself to an indication of the wholly opposed conceptions of Ludwig Blau, in the above-mentioned book, pp. 123-126, and Max Gruenbaum, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sprach- und Sagenkunde*, 1901, pp. 228-434. The Kabbalists considered both these conceptions of the *meforash* as legitimate. (cf. for example, Moses Cordovero, *Pardes rimonim*, chap. 19, para. 1.)

¹¹ The fact that this linguistic tradition dates back so far is a result of its being misconstrued, due to translation, as far back as the Coptic-gnostic scripts. Cf. my own explanations in the *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 30, 1931, pp. 170-176. Reference is also often made to this linguistic tradition in the writings of the mystique of the *Merkaba* between the 3rd and 7th centuries.

at the very latest, purely mystical divine names, which rely on an accumulation of letters, and which are taken from certain verses of the Bible or else by means of other processes which we cannot fathom, are also and likewise qualified as *Shem meforash*.

The fact that there did exist such purely mystical divine names in the tradition of strictly rabbinical Judaism, and not only in the writings of the Magi and the Theurgists of the same period, is unequivocally proven by the evidence given by Talmudic and Midrashic literature. The argument here also centers around the names of God, which are composed of 12, 42 and 72 letters, and to which especial meaning or functions were attributed.¹² Nowhere are we told in what way it bears any approximate relation with the Tetragram. This is particularly striking in as much as the great and mighty name of God is the topic of treatment very early on in literature; it is this name which brought about the creation, or rather the creation is closely affixed to the Name —i.e., the creation is contained within its limits by the name. But it is far from certain, in all cases, whether the Tetragram is implicitly connected here. In the tradition of the great scholastic leaders of the early Middle Ages the 42-lettered name of God, which has absolutely no visible connection with the Tetragram, is designated as that name which played an active part in the creation.¹³ A long time before any Talmudic Aggadah says that the “bottomless abyss” of all creation is sealed in the name,¹⁴ we can read virtually analogous assertions in apocryphal writings of the pre-Christian era. In the “Book of Jubilees” (36:7) Isaac implores his sons to fear God and to serve him “by the glorified, honoured, sublime and almighty name, which made heaven and earth and all things together.” In another apocryphal writing of the same period, the “Prayer of Manasses,” it is said that God has closed the abyss and sealed it with his mighty and exalted name.¹⁵ In addition, certain versions

¹² Blau, pp. 137-146. In the magic papyri and later on in the kabbalistic tradition there is even a divine name of a hundred letters. Cf. Bakhya ben Asher's Commentary on the Torah, ex. 3:4, in which this name is related back to the tradition of the Babylonian scholars of the Gaonic period.

¹³ For example in Hay Gaon and Rashi, cf. Blau, p. 125 and p. 132.

¹⁴ In *Makkoth* 11a.

¹⁵ Riesser, *Altjüdisches Schrifttum ausserhalb der Bibel*, 1928, p. 346.

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of the Great Hekhalòth, an essential mystical text of the Merkaba, mention this sealing of heaven and earth and the sealing of the name by which they were created.¹⁶

If the argument in the passages mentioned here deals with the name of God as the *agens* of the creation, the reason for this is still the magic conception of the might of the name, basically speaking; and the fact that this might has once again been effective. The name is a concentration of divine power, and in accordance with the different combination of these powers concentrated at this point, the various names can fulfill different functions. The creative *word* of God, which evokes heaven and earth, and which is substantiated in evidence by the account of the Creation in Genesis as well as elsewhere in the Psalms—"By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Psalm 33:6)—is certainly not the same as the name of God for the biblical authors. The fact that it became the word points to a significant transformation. From the coincidence of word and name two important consequences emerged which were instrumental for the development of the mystique of language in Judaism. On the one hand, by virtue of this identification, the word which communicates something, even if the communication takes the form of an imperative ("Let there be light!"), the word which imparts information of some kind becomes a name which issues no information save itself. What emerges from this is no more than the manifestation of that which was previously present in God himself, in the infinite fullness of his being and almighty power. In this context the Midrash tells how, *before* the Creation, God and his name existed alone.¹⁷ When the name becomes word, it becomes an essential part of what we may call the language of God, the language in which God, as it were, represents and manifests himself, just as he communicates with his creation, which by the medium of this language comes into being itself. This dual character of the divine word as a name as well determines the linguistic doctrine of the Kabbalists to a considerable extent. In another way, however, this identification leads to a further conception of the elements of the

¹⁶ For example in the Wertheimer version, chap. 23, para. 2, as well as in Jellinek's version, chap. 9.

¹⁷ *Pirkei Rabbi Eli'ezer*, chap. 3.

name and the word—a conception which accordingly differs from that under which the letters appear (or, for a Jew whose thought is formed by the Hebrew and Aramaic, letters would more precisely be called: consonants). The letters of the divine language are what lie at the basis of all creation by way of their combination. These letters, however, are those of the Hebrew language, seen as the original language and the language of revelation. This was the real starting point of the speculation about linguistic mystique, and this is what we shall proceed to examine.

In the Talmud this conception found its outcome in a much quoted sentence of one of the most notable esotericists of the 3rd century: "Bezalel (the builder of the Tabernacle) knew how to put together the letters, from which heaven and earth were created."¹⁸ The tabernacle is made in the image of the cosmos,¹⁹ and the builder of the tabernacle must therefore have possessed some of the secret knowledge about how the cosmos is arranged and works. By means of divine enlightenment he was imbued with a certain knowledge which enabled him to reconstruct as an image the work of the creation within a finite cadre. One can presume that among these letters those of the divine name are to be understood, although it might also be conceivable that in an extended sense a combination of the alphabet is intended, thus a broader notion. The creative force which resides in words and names, that quality of immediate and direct effect—in other words, their magic property—is thus referred back to the fundamental elements in which, for the mystic, the image of sound and the written image coincide reciprocally. We shall have to return to this connection at a later stage.

The fact that, in this area of thought, the divine breath which turns the creature man into the living being according to the account in the book of Genesis, and further reveals to man his possibility of speech, is testified to by a text of not inconsiderable weight. The so to speak official Aramaic translation of the Torah, which was used in divine service in the synagogue, the

¹⁸ *Berakboth* 55a.

¹⁹ *Midrash Tadsche*, chap. 2: "The Tabernacle was built in accordance with the creation of the world." This *midrash* is also to be found in *Bamidbar Rabba*, chap. XIII.

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Targùm Onkelos, renders the sentence in Genesis 2:7 "... and man became a living soul" as "...man became a spirit endowed with speech." Thus it is precisely language which makes of man a living being. But those minds with an inclination towards speculation associated with this a further question before long: must this linguistic element not have already been contained in the breath of God?

This leads us to the first text of Jewish literature, which yields the key words of the kabbalistic mystique of language and which is at the same time the most ancient text having a speculative character which is available to us in the Hebrew language. This is the *Sefer Yetsira*, "The Book of the Creation" (one could also translate this more expressively by "The Book of the Formation"); scholars differ in their dating of this book between the 2nd century and the 5th or 6th centuries; I myself am inclined to adhere to the earlier dating in the 2nd or 3rd centuries.²⁰ This is a slender work of only a few pages; it is written in a Hebrew which is solemn and deliberate, and at the same time often extremely laconic. At a much later date, in the early Middle Ages, it served philosophers and mystics alike, as well as Kabbalists, as an authority which they borrowed to uphold their various personal viewpoints in their numerous commentaries. It contains a considerable number of enigmatic sentences, although its basic thesis is reasonably self-evident, precisely in the points which concern us here. It sets forth the ancient speculations, which recur right up to the close of the late biblical era, about the divine figure of *Sophia* considered as divine Wisdom, in which all creation is grounded; but it also lends these speculations a new twist, by suggesting that the mystique of numbers and the mystique of words are juxtaposed without any real link between them.

By means of the 32 "wonderful paths of Wisdom" God created all things. These paths consist of the 10 original numbers, which are called *Sefiroth* here and which are the fundamental force of the order of the creation, and the 22 letters, that is, consonants, which are the elements which lie at the basis of

²⁰ Cfr. my explanations of the Book of Yetsira in *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, 1962, pp. 20-28.

everything created.²¹ The manner in which the numbers establish their relation with the letters is an enigma, and the author will pass over it in virtual silence. He deals with both phenomena individually, without establishing between them any association at the level of detail. Such an association occurs at only two places.²² In one instance, in respect of the second original number or Sefira, which is defined as the Pneuma, it is said that God engraved and chiselled out the 22 "fundamental letters" in this place. But this Pneuma is already the first organic element: air. On the contrary, the first Sefira, which is designated as that divine Pneuma, Ruakh Elohim, and which is mentioned in the Book of Genesis 1:2, has, for this author, no relation to the linguistic elements, as one might actually expect. Furthermore, this author has not yet gone quite as far in his own concept of the mystique of language as have the Kabbalists in his footsteps. This is all the more noteworthy as the point had almost been reached when the divine Pneuma and the breath of God, which, according to the above-mentioned Aramaic paraphrase in the book of Genesis, awakened in man the power of the word, could be brought into association with each other. In another passage it is said that the original numbers 5 to 10 correspond to the six directions of space, measured out by God and sealed by Him with the six permutations of the three consonants J, H and V. These three signs, however, in Hebrew script, also stand for the three vowels I, A and O, and constitute the magic syllable *jao* as well as the name *Jaho*. Both these play an extraordinary role in all Jewish-influenced magic practices dating back to late antiquity.²³ These three consonants—one of which is repeated—are those which form the Tetragram. The elements of the actual name of God are also the seals which are affixed to the creation and which protect it from breaking asunder.

The 22 letters, from which every created thing is composed,

²¹ The Book of Yetsira has frequently been translated into European languages. As a result of the considerable complexities presented by certain passages, such translations are frequently at variance with each other. Chapter 1 deals with the ten *sefirot*, chapters 2-5 the letters.

²² Both these passages are to be found in chapter 1 about the *sefirot*, paras. 10 and 13.

²³ Cf. *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, p. 27.

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are undoubtedly part and parcel of the 32 paths of *Sophia*. But there is no apparent explanation as to why these paths were themselves created, since in this instance *Sophia* appears rather to be an uncreated force which was to be found within God from time immemorial. In this book, however, the borderlines between a created thing and an uncreated thing are to some extent softened. If one adheres to the normal linguistic usage in the last paragraph of the first chapter, which utilises certain fixed formulae which correspond to the initial stages of the Creation, the impression gained in any event is that these letters exist before the *Tobu vabobu* (= chaos), before the throne which embodies the divine Glory and before the beings which inhabited the world of the *Merkaba* (= the divine chariot). They are the organs by means of which all further creation can be effected, the organs which God availed himself of, as can be seen from various other indications in the book. Nevertheless, it is not said that they are the elements of a divine word or of divine utterance; this point is in no instance the evident subject of the argument here. In the process of the Creation, God manipulated these letters in accordance with determined procedures: he engraved them in the Pneuma—the Hebrew word *ruakh* means both air and spirit—he chiselled them out of the Pneuma, weighed them, exchanged them and combined them, and finally formed out of them the soul; here this would mean the essence of everything created and everything to be created at some future time. They pass through the stages of the voice, the Pneuma and articulate speech; they are then “fixed” in this articulate form in the five organs of the mouth: the throat, the palate, the tongue, the teeth and the lips. They therefore appear here as essentially human linguistic elements. But no sooner has this determination been made than their cosmic signification is brought into prominence. They are attached to the sphere (although it is not quite clear to which sphere, but one can presume it to be the celestial sphere) in such a way that when two concentric circles, for example, which both at some point contain these elements, turn in opposite ways, then the 231

²⁴ For example in the Commentary of the Azriel from Gerona, which is printed in the editions of the book of Yetsira under the name of the Nakhmanides.

combinations which are possible from 22 elements emerge in the movement of these circles. But these 231 combinations are the "doors" through which every created thing will pass. Every facet of reality is grounded in these original combinations, by means of which God brought into being the oral movement. The alphabet is the original source of language and at the same time the original source of being. "Thus it is that all creation and all speech are born of one name." What is to be understood by this name? Can it be the Tetragram, the letters of which are linked with the 231 combinations, as is supposed by several kabbalistic commentators? Can it be the alphabetic series itself, which is to be designated as being this mystical name—a conception for which there are not a few parallels in Greek and Latin sources?²⁵ Or might one possibly disregard the precise interpretation of the word *shem*, that is, "name," and allow the argument to proceed with the focus on a scheme or method, by means of which the formation of words is effected?²⁶ The text does not permit any definite answer to be made to these questions. It is nonetheless clear that the author had in mind a conception of the Hebrew language, according to which the roots of the words would not, as claimed by all later grammarians, be drawn from three consonants, but only two; further, this third radical would be to some extent an extension and supplementary movement of the alphabet. This point of view was shared, before the emergence of the so-called establishment of Hebrew grammar, by the most ancient hymnologists of synagogical poetry, who wrote in much the same way as the author of the Book of Yetsira in Palestine.

Every facet of reality which exists beyond the divine Pneuma thus contains linguistic elements; and the clear opinion of the author is that every created thing has a linguistic essence which consists in any conceivable combination of these fundamental letters. Over and above he allots to the individual letters not only predetermined functions, but also objects, such as the

²⁵ Cf. the material of Franz Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, 1925, pp. 69-80, as well as my own observation in *op. cit.* p. 25, where I have interpreted an ancient Graeco-Hebrew amulet in which the alphabetical series is clearly used for a magic purpose.

²⁶ For example in Erich Bischoff, *Elemente der Kabbala*, Part I, 1913, p. 67.

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planets, the signs of the Zodiac in the sky, the days of the week, the months of the year, and the principal organs of the human body. Macrocosm and microcosm are also clearly inter-connected in their linguistic essence, and each and every sphere of the Creation breathes the same linguistic spirit which, in the holy language, has fashioned itself in manners of expression which we can grasp ourselves. It becomes self-evident that this conception of the essence of the Creation is closely linked with the linguistic conception of magic. And in fact the viewpoint that the Book of Yetsira pursued not only theoretical designs but was also possibly destined to thaumaturgical practices can in no way be dismissed as absurd, as, on other occasions, I have tried to show by analysis of the notion of the creation of Golem.²⁷

This connection between magic and mystic conceptions and more specifically the transition from one to the other is demonstrated in addition from another angle in the esoteric tradition of Judaism. The use of the Torah for magic purposes, which is certainly very far removed from its originally conceived design, was to make its appearance in Hellenistic times. In any event, for the period in which the Book of Yetsira came into being, it is revealed in the obscure papyrus scripts which were not satisfied with the five books of Moses and their mantic usage,²⁸ but conceived of a sixth or seventh book of Moses which could be taken as a purely magical manual. The Hebrew literature of this period which deals with the mystique of the Merkaba is filled with such mystical divine names, whose etymology is rarely clear and recognisable. And it is difficult to draw a clear line of demarcation between such texts and purely magical works, such as the very recently published *Sefer ha-razim*, which is an angelological system with magic applications.²⁹ Divine names, which bear some relation to any specific aspect of the manifestation of God—even if this relation is not really apparent—and names of angels intermingle here as they do in the obscure papyrus scripts. It is often hard for us to understand the methods

²⁷ In my book *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, 1960, pp. 209-219.

²⁸ Cf. Max Grunwald, *Bibliomantie*, in the *Mitteilungen für jüdische Volkskunde*, Book 10, 1902, pp. 80-98.

²⁹ *Sepher Ha-Ratsim, a newly recovered book of magic from the Talmudic period*, ed. Mordecai Margalioth, 1966.

by which such mysterious names were extracted from the Torah. We do however have access to Hebrew and Aramaic texts from the late Talmudic period and the post-Talmudic period, which indicate the magic utilisation of such names, which were extracted principally from the Torah and the Book of Psalms by singling out certain determined letters which were often, but by no means always, the initial letters of the words of any given verse. One such book, by the name of *Shimushei Torah*, which means literally: "Theurgic applications of the Torah," recounts in its introduction that Moses obtained not only the text of the Torah (in the state of verbal partition corresponding to the version handed down to us) on Mount Sinai, but also those secret combinations of letters, the "names," which, when taken as a whole, constitute a different and altogether esoteric aspect of the Torah.³⁰

Among the first Kabbalists, however, who to a slight degree manipulated the accents somewhat, this magic tradition developed into a tradition which related to the mystical character of the Torah seen as a divine name which comprehended all the rest. This transition was achieved in two distinct steps. The first resides in a statement of Moses ben Nahman (Nakhmanides). This statement occurs in particularly conspicuous passages, namely in the preamble to his commentary on the Torah, which, in Jewish literature, has to occupy a preeminent position. Nakhmanides was the most authoritative spokesman of the first Spanish Kabbalists. His preponderant standpoint as a Talmudist assured the mystical stance of the Kabbalists now coming to light a central position in the Judaic camp. In his own words: "We have an authentic tradition, in accordance with which the whole of the Torah consists of divine names, namely in the manner in which the words, which we can read there, can be divided up in very varied ways, and namely into (esoteric) names ... In the Aggadic assertion, that the Torah was originally written with black fire upon white fire,³¹ we have a clear confirmation of our own opinion that the version as written down was a continuous

³⁰ A translation of this piece can be found in August Wensche, *Aus Israels Lehrhalle, kleine Midrashim*, vol. I, 1907, pp. 127-133, NB p. 132.

³¹ A 3rd century assertion, which has given rise to many speculations among the Kabbalists. Cf. for example, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, pp. 70-71.

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script without verbal divisions; for this reason it was possible to read it as a series of (esoteric) names as well as a history in the traditional manner and a series of commandments. Thus it happened that the Torah was handed to Moses in a form in which the division into words also suggested that it be read as a series of divine commandments. Simultaneously, however, it was transmitted to him orally in such a way that it could be read as a series of names.”

This mystical structure of the Torah as a series of divine names also explains, in the author’s view, why each letter in the Torah is respectively important, and why a scroll of the Torah for synagogical use became unusable if it contained one letter too few or one letter too many. But this conception gave rise to the next simple step, in the direction of the still more radical thesis that the Torah consists not only of the divine names, but, in a specific sense, and as a whole, constitutes the one and only great name of God. This however is no longer a magic thesis; it is a purely mystical thesis. It is repeatedly and explicitly formulated by the more senior colleagues of Nakhmanides who were working with him at the kabbalistic center at Gerona: “The five books of the Torah are *the Name* of the Sacred Being. Blessed be the Lord.”³² But this same thesis can also be found in the *Sefer ha-khayim*, a text which is totally independent of the Kabbalists of Gerona, and which was printed in the first three decades of the 13th century in northern or central France. Unexpectedly it is ascribed to the speculative scholars, *anshei ha-mekhhkar*, who are said to have declared that the Torah and the Throne of Glory are “the divine name itself,” or, in another possible translation, “the substance of the illustrious name,” *ezem ha-shem ha-nikhhad*.³³ The fact that the author of the Book of Zohar, a classical product of the Spanish Kabbala of the 13th century, expressly assumes this interpretation in several instances

³² This formulation is found in Ezra ben Salomon, in his commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoths, manuscript of the Vatican, Hebr. 294, folio 34a, in the revision of this text by his colleague Azriel, *Peruch Aggadoth*, ed. Tishby, 1943, p. 76, as well as in Jacob ben Sheshet’s book *Emuna u-Bitachon*, which was erroneously printed under the name of the Nakhmanides, chap. 19. All these Kabbalists belong to the circle of mystics of Gerona.

³³ *Sefer be-Khayim*, ms. Parma de Rossi, 1390, folio 135a.

underlies the reason why this thesis has become the generally accepted kabbalistic doctrine.³⁴

"I would presume that this new concept was also thoroughly familiar to Nakhmanides, but that he shied away from the idea of giving expression to such a far-reaching mystical thesis in any specific work which was destined for a broad readership which was not initiated in to the kabbalistic doctrine. The assertion that the Torah is, in its essence, nothing more than the one and only great name of God, was certainly an audacious and almost foolhardy statement, which demands an explanation. Here the Torah is conceived of as a mystical whole, whose purpose, in the first analysis, does not consist in conveying a specific message, but rather in giving expression to the power and almightiness of God himself; this almightiness would seem to be concentrated in his "Name." This whole conception of the Torah as a Name does not mean that it is a question here of a name which could be pronounced as such; furthermore it has nothing to do with a rational understanding of the possible communicative and social functions of a name. The argument that the Torah is the divine name signifies that, in the Torah, God has been able to express his transcendental being, or, anyway at least that part or aspect of his being which can be revealed in and through the Creation. To go further than this: as the Torah was already considered by the ancient Aggadah as an instrument of the Creation, through which the world came into existence, so could this new conception of the Torah be considered as an extension and mystical re-interpretation of the older conception. For the instrument which assisted the world to come into existence, is certainly in this case far more than a mere instrument, in as far as, and we have referred to this earlier, it represents the concentrated power of God himself, and this power is expressed in the name."³⁵

In this context we are going far beyond the previous viewpoint, according to which the Torah embraces the secret laws and the harmonious order by which every created thing is ruled and controlled. This accordingly constitutes the general

³⁴ For example in Zohar III, 36a: "The whole Torah is a unique holy and mystic name." Similar definitions in II, 87b; III 80b, 176a.

³⁵ G. Scholem, *Zur Kabbala un ihrer Symbolik*, 1960, p. 59.

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law of the cosmos. It also establishes a far more deeply significant thesis, according to which all the concrete and serial interpretations of the Torah, considered as the language of the Name, represent nothing more than relative approximations of this unique absolute which, in the linguistic domain, is the name of God. These approximations can themselves lead to far-reaching truths about the Creation and the life of man. Each layer of meaning can be supplemented by another deeper layer, but in the infinite stages of the Creation they are in the last analysis no more than modifications of this absolute word, which is the Name.*

* The conclusion of this article by Gershom Scholem will appear in the next issue of *Diogenes*.